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Mapping Architecture as Archive: Stories in the Walls

Caitlin Anne McCuskey
Oberlin College

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Caitlin McCuskey

Mapping Architecture as Archive: Stories in the Walls

Abstract

My work explores the relationship between memory and architectural space, narrative and structure. It treats architecture as a physical archive, a record of the past and the present. I work with drawing, screen print, and sculpture to tease out and interpret these narratives. Connecting bodies, space, and time, I am inspired by the stories in the walls.

Introduction

Abandoned buildings have always fascinated me. I wrote many of my college application essays about architectural spaces, line drawings, and stories. As a high school senior, I was thinking about these three elements separately, knowing I wanted to spend time in college studying how they connect. The open-ended application prompts gave me the opportunity to write about my intellectual passions, even if I wasn't quite sure why I was so fascinated by them. For example, my response to the prompt, "Write about an interest," gestures toward my artistic practice today:

I have recently become curious about places that others have vacated and left to ruin: the bare foundation that once supported a fully booked hotel, the skeletal frame of a rotting barn, or the boarded windows of a scrap metal shack by a desert highway. Exploring abandoned buildings in lonely areas probably makes me a great candidate for the role of Unsuspecting First Victim in a horror film, but it does not spook me. I have fun reconstructing the architecture in my head, imagining how the buildings might have looked when lived in; I put each slab, plank, and pane back into place, until I cannot see the rubble anymore.

I remember choosing these images from my experience looking out the window during long family road trips across rural and desolate areas of the western United States. As the landscape changed, I noticed how the sparse buildings had deteriorated in different ways, spending hours obsessively searching the scenery until each new (old) building came into view. Whether they were rotting, caving in, or boarded up, these structures were all quite clearly abandoned—and thus interesting to me.

My essays also explained what I saw as a connection between the art of drawing and the science of physics:

Both drawing and physics translate a three-dimensional universe onto a two-dimensional page, flattening round realities into forms and formulas. A charcoal pencil shades a sphere; a mechanical pencil calculates its density. Cross-hatching helps to balance values; cross-multiplying helps to balance equations. As I am illustrating objects and estimating forces, the pictures and numbers begin to blur together. To capture the way light passes through and reflects off glass, I apply my knowledge of optics and lenses. To determine how changes in diameter affect the flow and pressure of water, I visualize the pipe as it widens and narrows. Art and science cross paths so often that they have become a single line, running from mind to hand to page.

Interdisciplinary connections became an inspiration. I was interested in how both mathematical and creative representations of space map the physical world onto the artistic page. In the last paragraph of my essay, I even connected the decrepit buildings to possible storylines.

Here is where the affair was started; where the pig was slaughtered; where the money was stashed. Then I go further, adding the fourth dimension of time, as I picture the people who might have lived there: tourists and bellhops, farmers and families, hermits and outlaws. Here is where the affair was started; where the pig was slaughtered; where the money was stashed. History combines with art and science to fill in the hollow structures that now feel like home.

On these road trips, I constructed stories to explain the ruined structures. My desire to make sense of the structures brought storytelling to the center of my early artistic practice.

While writing these essays, I visited the Museum of Jurassic Technology (MJT), where I first started thinking about archives and storytelling. This museum knows how to tell a good story, even ones that don't make immediate sense. I remember entering the building through a black, unlabeled door. The rooms were dimly lit and carpeted, creating a sense of intimate domesticity that contradicted the institutional sterility often associated with museums. The objects on display were seemingly unrelated: a voice-over about the life span of a bee was exhibited next to an unlabeled scale model of a trailer park. The museum is the subject of Lawrence Weschler's *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, in which he too tries to make sense of its seeming chaos. At times, it seems as if the entire space is an elaborate joke. However, the earnest and professional way that the information is presented gives the museum just enough credibility to balance on the thin line between perceived "reality" and imagination. By doing so, the MJT confronts the viewer with questions about what "authenticity" actually entails.

Academic Influence

These college essays allowed me to structure my emerging thoughts about space into more cohesive ideas. These ideas crystallized the architectural lens through which I chose to see the world and propelled me into my first year. I took an architectural theory course during the first semester, and found that the theoretical jargon was difficult to grasp, let alone respond to. However, I was compelled by the theory, despite sometimes getting lost in the language. I was inspired by the ways these writers thought about the world through built space and articulated the value in that practice.

My first experience with technical and formal blueprints occurred in this course. The assignment given was to map our bedroom to scale, including elevation, floor plan, and cross-section drawings. Detailing a space is complex, and I had a difficult time staying proportionate. My final draft didn't make sense, and therefore did not receive an amazing grade. My drawing did not uphold standards of architectural drafting: the door was much too high and narrow, the measurements of the exterior didn't match the interior, and my window was apparently six inches thick. Nonetheless, I was hooked: the errors in the drawing fascinated me, and I started looking for other ways to represent architectural space.

Sculpture quickly became an apt medium in which to do so. In my first studio course, *Art and the Environment*, found and recycled objects were given new meaning as sculptural materials. My work explored different ways to map urban systems. I built a tri-layered Styrofoam structure, connecting each plane with found computer circuit boards and industrial wire (Appendix: image A). The mechanical components of this sculpture represented modes of transportation, while the Styrofoam stood in for the built environment. In this way, I was thinking about cities in terms of both networks and layers, and figuring out how to map both dimensions at the same time.

As soon as mapping emerged as a theme in my work, location became more important. I spent time on long walks through Oberlin, taking photographs and notes, documenting the local architecture I found intriguing. In a color theory course, I deconstructed those photographs. The challenge here was to deconstruct these architectural elements, to better understand their aesthetic and practical function. I noticed that stairs were a prominent theme in all these images. Stairs have the powerful ability to draw the eye and the body to the doorway, up through space to a threshold. I focused on this architectural element in order to ground myself in the project.

“Melting Stairs,” was a series of amoeba-shaped paintings pasted together into a staircase form. The installation was about eight feet high and three feet wide (Appendix: image B). This was my first experience working large scale and bringing a deconstructed architectural form into space.

My work is inspired by two artists who play with these ideas of deconstruction: Alice Neel and Egon Schiele. Though both work with figural forms, their lines break down distinctions between figures and landscapes. Neel’s work celebrates oddness and emphasizes strange bodily features in order to capture the subject (Appendix: image C). There is something unsettling about the way she paints her subject staring through the canvas at the viewer. Schiele also breaks down forms, depicting himself, his family, and the architecture of his city (Appendix: image D). After years of anatomical figure study, Schiele was able to see the world more clearly, and therefore his distorted depictions of bodies are intentional and informed. Elegantly grotesque, his work evokes a deeper level of emotion than the average portrait. In his paintings, he is able to capture a sense of bodily change and the fluidity of the subject. I aspire to draw and render space in the same way, distorting forms in order to see them more fully.

I continued to explore the creative potential of deconstruction in my *Problems in Drawing* course, which pushed me to think critically about how lines interact with physical space. Frank Gehry is an architect whose sketches and models visualize constructed space fluidly (Appendix: image E). For example, Gehry is known for crumpling up a piece of paper to use as a building model. In a field of study that rewards rigidity, his work embraces looseness. The power of his “scribbles” to become structures inspired me to explore architecture in the context of the humanities. To me, the architectural field has always seemed rigid and precise, driven by formulas and measurements. Gehry, though a master of mathematics, emphasized the artistic creativity and flow of architecture above all else in his work.

Lebbeus Woods, an architectural theorist, also did creative visual work related to “architectural flow” as he explored what he considered to be the useful and useless aspects of architecture. A skilled draftsman, Woods spent much of his career rendering physically impossible structures and spaces: “The Light Pavilion in Chengdu, China,” was the only one of his designs was ever built. His self-proclaimed title of “architectural theorist” allowed him to work imaginatively and freely. Living in San Francisco, Woods attempted to solve many of the earthquake-related structural problems in the Bay area. As a licensed architect, Woods holds authority in his work. Though his design may never be able to support itself, his artistic skill and

thorough marginal notes create a sense of professional integrity. In these drawings, his spatial awareness and attention to detail give credibility to the plan, even when that idea is not feasible (Appendix: image F).

Both of these architectural scholars helped me to define my interest in using gestural, loose lines to render space, both real and imagined. Drawing from observation, I practiced this line style to depict the architecture around me. After spending winter term in New York City, I was inspired by the city as a system and as a form. The Chrysler building, a New York icon, became a focal point for deconstructing form. Keeping Gehry's and Woods's sketches in mind, I moved back and forth between frantic scribbling and meticulous drafting, attempting to render multiples of the same building (Appendix: image G). After exploring these styles, my work moved off the page, wire lines emulating drawn forms. I used wire to translate my drawings into sculptural lines, existing in space. Though this wirework was crude and experimental, it helped me envision how lines and forms could metamorphose into objects and structures. Theoretical architecture was becoming central to my practice.

After spending some time struggling to create spatial representations in wire, I became increasingly interested in Alexander Calder's masterful work. I could see Gehry's loose lines in Calder's wire facial and bodily sculptures (Appendix: image H). His lines are few and necessary, shaping an effortless portrait. This process is much simpler with a pencil than with wire, and his style has greatly affected how my line moves across the page and into space. My work in *Advanced Individual Projects*, "Fifty Faces," was a large-scale installation piece composed of wire face silhouettes suspended from the ceiling with clear fishing line. Themes of shadow, movement, and ghosts informed this work. The presence of viewers moving in and out of the wire faces contributed to a complex web of shadows cast against the walls. This piece explored a new idea: human movement in the context of space, beginning to connect bodily and architectural ideas (Appendix: image I).

Also in my third year, I came across Greg Lynn's computer program "The Embryological House" (Appendix: image J), a randomized algorithm that slowly molds a virtual spherical blob into an organic form. Theoretically, this computer-generated form serves as a preliminary model for an architect, a theory that reminds me of Gehry's crumpled paper. However, much like Woods's designs, this program was never quite successful: it was never used to build a structure, and it eventually became technologically obsolete. This program breaks away from the implicit

and mandatory “usefulness” often associated with architecture. “The Embryological House” allowed me to begin separating architecture from intention, rooting form in an arbitrary algorithm, much as Calder grounded form in shadows and silhouettes.

Studying abroad in Siena, Italy, in the spring of my third year, I added historical research and thus also the new dimension of time to my spatial work. Siena is a walled medieval city layered on top of itself over hundreds of years. The material that composes the city (bricks, cobblestones, and mortar) is historically and culturally valuable; its buildings and structures are rarely demolished. Expansion in the city inevitably demands creative problem-solving. Windows, for example, become obvious markers of change: some are bricked over or half-sunk in the ground, as if the street has started to swallow them from below, while others are discreetly sanded to blend into walls darkened with age. Occasionally, false painted windows adorn windowless sections of the city walls. In a place like Siena, time becomes visible in the patchwork walls of the city.

Walking allowed me to experience Siena more fully, by constructing a mental map of various routes and landmarks. I used the wall as a guide to orient myself on these walks. Thinking about the psycho-geography of the city and the traces of lives led there, I collected many objects discarded on the street, including clothespins, twine, rocks, dead bugs, and a doll hand (Appendix: image K). I also took several time-based observational videos, recording the people walking by my camera lens. I presented this work in an invented gallery setting, using a booklet full of stories I had written about the exhibited artifacts to guide the viewer through the exhibit. My goal was to represent my own experience of Siena, blurring the line between reality and fantasy, and bringing the term “authentic” into question. In this way, the Museum of Jurassic Technology inspired my work in Siena.

By interpreting my personal experience as a part of Siena’s long history, I connected emotionally to the city. My understanding of architecture as a physical narrative allowed me to see the story of the city as it became legible in bricks, cobblestones, and cracks. I am particularly interested in the ghostly residue of stories that cling to walls and permeate through space and time. The word “archive” allows me to define that residue as a relationship between structures and stories because it refers to both the space in which objects are collected and the stories told by objects themselves. In architectural archives, meaningful “objects,” or mementos, are recorded through the ways in which their stories are woven into the architecture itself. My aim as

an artist is not to interpret these stories, but rather to map the often-overlooked archive of physical space. These stories are inextricably linked to the presence and absence of people and their movement.

Research and Imagination: the Archive

I work with drawing, screen print, and sculpture to mirror an architectonic flow: sketch to model to structure. Ink permits mapping outside the bounds of physics; screen print efficiently enables duplication and layering of these maps. To translate these drawings and maps into models, I use lightweight and easily manipulated paper and wire. Then, I examine—and challenge—what it might mean to refine that the model into a finished, durable wooden structure. At each stage of my artistic process, I incorporate found objects, which suggest stories in a way that raw materials such as wire and paper does not. In artistically representing an architectural archive, found objects inspire and infuse my work with suggestions of meaning beyond my own intention. I try to use these recycled materials in order to create a sustainable practice, as well as to acknowledge the quiet stories woven into them.

The Center for Land Use Interpretation greatly influenced my desire to create this kind of imagined archive. The work of CLUI is primarily based online, with a few physical offices scattered across the country. Their mission is “dedicated to the increase and diffusion of knowledge about how the nation’s lands are apportioned, utilized, and perceived.” This organization collaboratively maps the physical land of the U.S.. This map is dynamic and specific, using on-site observation, documentation, and stories to create a sense of place. Organized by a long list of keywords including “bridges,” “heaven and hell,” and “points of interest,” the map encourages users to interpret the information however they see fit. For example, one project is focused on “show caves” as architectural spaces. This project addresses the ways in which tourism affects caves, and the architectural solutions that allow people to explore the underground realm. CLUI is involved in countless projects like these, finding overlooked occurrences that are worth documenting. The culmination of these projects is an “American Land Museum” which is a “network of landscape exhibition sites being developed across the United States.” The entirety of the U.S. is considered part of the exhibition site, breaking the mold of what a museum can be. In this way, their work is both an archival and an artistic endeavor.

I aim to inspire a similar research-based wonder in my own work, exploring the archive in relation to the creation, function, and inevitable deterioration of architecture. In an effort to better understand Oberlin as a historic and architectural site, I began exploring in and around the town itself at the beginning of my fourth year, much as I had done in Siena. A few lucky conversations led me to find three abandoned sites over the course of a few months: an overgrown backyard shed, a derelict construction paving plant off State Route 511, and an abandoned home on Quarry Road. I collected objects, drew maps, and filmed in these spaces. From this work, I began to construct a narrative, connecting the sites and trying to understand how they came to be forgotten.

I soon found, however, that this research led me too far down an interpretive rabbit hole. I was spending hours searching online for names and addresses to connect people to these spaces. I became obsessed with trying to map the ghosts and their stories. In doing so, I didn't address my social privilege in entering these spaces or realize the ethical problems with inventing anecdotes about past inhabitants. This oversight became most apparent in the abandoned home littered with intimate family photos, confidential financial records, personal checks, and handwritten journals. While the overgrown shed and the derelict factory were technically private property, I didn't particularly feel like an intruder until I entered the abandoned home on Quarry Road. On the porch, a Fed-Ex package delivered in December of 2001 lay ripped open and forgotten. Bibles and scripture booklets full of pencil marks covered the floor, scattered and moldy. Several handwritten financial ledgers with detailed notes about the family's weekly expenditures had been torn out of filing cabinets and strewn across the stairs. On the upstairs bed, a urine soaked suitcase lay open and empty. Looking down in the cellar, the floor shimmered. I was halfway down the stairs before I realized the entire basement was flooded with at least a foot of water. It was a shocking scene. I visited this site three times, and each time, objects were moved or trees cut down: I was clearly not the only person visiting this space. In an effort to piece together the story of the house and the people connected to it, I had lost my sense of artistic purpose. In a frenzy of documentation, I had neglected to ask myself *why* I was doing this and what it all meant aesthetically.

In an attempt to ask these crucial questions of my work and myself, I moved my practice back into the studio, reflecting on the reasons behind my interest in abandoned spaces. I am inspired by moments that blur intention and accident. Ruined architecture is a perfect example of

that juxtaposition. When artifice, the pinnacle of intention, is overgrown and left to the elements, unintentional beauty is created. The essential backbone of the structure is revealed, just like in a gestural sketch. My work attempts to channel these moments and interpret bodies in relation to architecture using line as language. I began exploring different mediums: layering wire silhouettes on ink transparencies, experimenting with clear fluids and jellies, smothering wire people with rubber cement and suspending them in gelatin. I wanted the architecture to remain fluid in my study of bodily movement, creating unstable structures and unpredictable landscapes for my wire figures.

Presence and Absence: Ghosts

Spatially, the movement between presence and absence has informed my work. Temporally, the threshold between the past and the present runs parallel to my ideas about space. I am interested in the transitional moments that occur between sketch, model, building, and ruin. My architectural drawings aim to depict precariousness through detailed dreamscapes of buildings balancing atop one another. Similarly, when building wire constructions, I aim to create an intentional tangle of lines and negative space. The tiny figures in architectural plans inform the silhouettes that populate these spaces, all haunting presences able to embody absent narratives.

My approach to rendering people is thus inextricably linked to architecture. Envisioning space as an extension of the body has allowed my practice to move seamlessly back and forth between architectural and anatomical forms. My gestural lines are meant to evoke a bodily shadow rather than a realistic figure. I use these visceral sketches to map the space in which bodies exist, move, and endure through time. I aim to represent this movement by mapping the body in motion, removing one moment out of the infinite and making it uncannily permanent. Understanding these drawings as a documentation of a fleeting moment, I have begun to think of these figures as ghosts, beings trapped in the liminal space between a present and absent state. I use the term “ghost” here to indicate a story connected to an absent figure. George Saunders’s novel, *Lincoln and the Bardo*, inspired much of my thinking about haunted threshold space. Here, Saunders uses the bardo, a Tibetan term to define spiritual existence between living and dead, as the setting for his writing. Multiple haunted voices tell their stories all at once, creating a cacophony of memories. Since reading this book, I frequently recognize bardos all around. I can

sense liminal space when I step into an abandoned building; the absence of bodies encourages me to listen for the stories and look for the traces of the past.

By distilling form and history down to a series of lines, I aim to render the core nature of the subject; my gestural sketches depend upon years of study in figure drawing courses. Without those sessions, I would not be able to capture the ghostly forms that represent the heart of my practice. My process involves making several variations of the same sketch, incorporating different materials in order to translate from drawing to sculpture. Within this process, I often use film and photography to understand the subject and location of my work more fully. I have found wire very useful in extending line drawings into space. By rendering my pencil sketches in malleable wire, I feel a more tactile connection to what I have drawn, and I can see more clearly how my work extends into the space it explores.

When moving from drawing to sculpture, the limitations of wire as a material reflect the limitations of time in my drawing process. Rendering the movement of bodies through space is thus time-sensitive. Looking out the window of my studio onto Main Street below, I quickly record people moving through the frame: three or four seconds, and they disappear. These figures evoke the glimpsed bodily form without revealing the details (Appendix: image L).

Current Work: Blueprints, Models, and Structures

For the halftime show this year, I presented two sculptural works: “Blueprint” and “Model.” Both depicted silhouettes of bodies moving through space; the architecture was implied rather than overtly present. “Blueprint” was a layered drawing of the people walking on the street below. I drew on transparent paper over the course of a few months, observing pedestrians and mapping their movement. I then layered these drawings on top of one another, displaying them between two sheets of plexiglass. Lastly, I glued several small wire figures on the plexiglass. These wire figures were breaking out of the plexiglass, attempting to symbolize a transitional moment. In all, I don’t think this piece was completely successful. It helped me work through ideas regarding space and bodily movement, but the drawings weren’t prominent enough (Appendix: image M).

In “Model,” I filled a twelve by twelve-inch acrylic cube with wire figures suspended by fishing line. I filled the cube with water, allowing the figures to become weightless. I also incorporated water in order to hide the fishing line and refract light through the cube. I neglected

to consider the inevitable oxidation that would take place when the iron wire rusted in the water. “Model” then became an unintentional study in decay. Immediately, the water began to discolor. Pale yellow turned to dark red turned to deep bronze over the course of two months. Half of the water evaporated and the figures were left coated in rusty ooze. The oxidation of the wire created an intricate lined pattern of tiny bubbles on the walls of the cube. Over many weeks, the sculpture redefined itself outside of my control (Appendix: image N).

In the end, “Model” was a much more successful sculpture than “Blueprint” due to the addition of an unexpected element (water) and the deterioration of the metal figures. However, I felt the need to address the intentionality in the piece. I hadn’t foreseen the rust or the evaporation. Had I considered that, I might have been able to manipulate the oxidation process to my aesthetic advantage. Going forward, I used “Model” as a jumping off point for a more intentional body of future work.

For my final show, I am showing sculptural objects and prints in three titled “collections.” I am reusing the titles from last semester, but thinking of my work as a series, a layered collection. The “Blueprint Series” is made up of four screen prints on black paper and one “negative” print with dark ink on a white background. These prints depict a dream-like and precarious cityscape, buildings stacked and swaying atop one another (Appendix: image O). I aim to map my experience walking through Siena with these prints and connect the repeated forms with architectural moments mirrored in Oberlin. For example, the parking lot behind the conservatory reveals the backside of the main street buildings, layers of brick and stone that document the changing narrative of the architecture. Here again, time reveals itself through small architectural discrepancies. I interpret this space as an archive, a legible collection of windows, fire escapes, and concrete.

I wanted to also incorporate a figural element into the show to converse with the architectural space, which exists in the next collection “Model Series.” I translated my pedestrian figural drawings into sculptures, stretching and twisting thin wire to represent a bodily form in motion. Mounted on the wall, the sculptural perspective mirrors my drawings and aims to create an imagined space using only bodies frozen in time. The wire bodies are made of extremely thin 38-mm wire (Appendix: image P). The lines are more detailed and mirror the drawings more successfully than “Blueprint” from last semester. I am framing the transparency drawings from “Blueprint” on the wall to inform my sculptures.

The last group, “Structure Series,” consists of a stick frame house built from two-by-fours. The dimensions of the house are eight by eight by nine feet (Appendix: image Q). I’m using the term “house” because I’m interested in how the house is often the smallest building block of the city, connected with very specific domestic memory. The roof of the stick frame structure is also a gable roof, the roof style most commonly associated with houses: two sloping sides coming together along a horizontal ridge beam. This piece is in conversation with a small 3D print of the house that will be approximately six by six by eight inches.

Stick frame construction is one of the most common ways to build. The frame is laid out with “sticks” at each corner as supports. I built this house in pieces, each wall constructed separately with spaces for two windows and a door. Through trial and error, I came to understand relational measurement, spatial awareness, and sheer labor in the context of architecture. The 3D print is constructed in the same manner: four separately printed walls and roof connected at the corners. I designed this print in Fusion360, a CAD program, after I had already built the wooden frame. By reversing time, the design process became malleable. I could fit my own narrative into the project. By executing backwards, I attempted to break down the building process in order to better understand how I operate as an artist in an architectural realm.

Overall, my work on architecture, mapping, bodies, and stories has evolved and grown during my four years of study at Oberlin and abroad. The three main themes of this work--bodies, space, and time--have become increasingly tangled together. My work records the psychogeographic webs that inform architectural space, and archives the conscious and subconscious movements that make these webs tremble.

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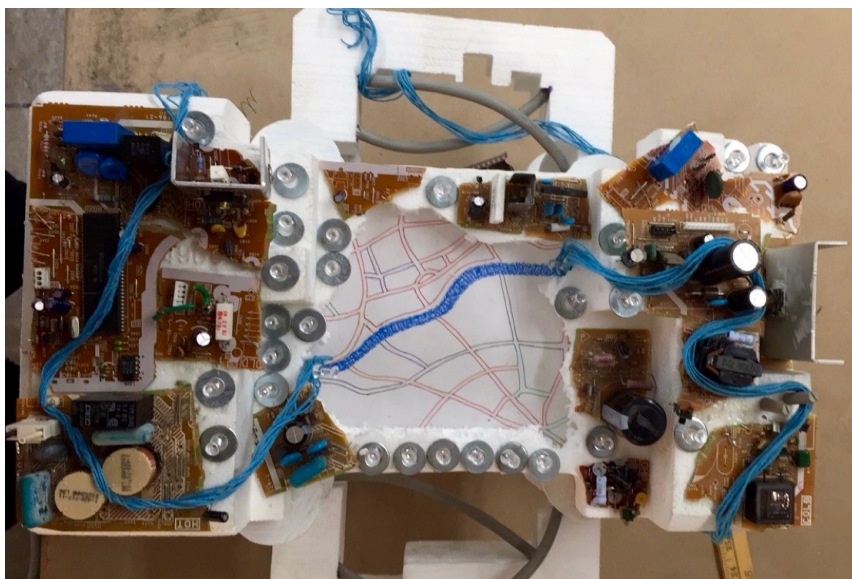
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Appendix: Images

A.



Untitled. 2015.
12"x6"x18" found
material.

B.



Melting Stairs. 2015. 8'x4'.
acrylic paint on paper, collage.

C.



Hartley and Ginny. Alice Neel. 1970.
Image courtesy of the Akvarallmuseet.

D.



Houses in Krumau.
Egon Schiele. 1917.
Image courtesy of
Artnet.

E.



Disney Concert Hall.
Frank Gehry.
Image Courtesy of
Arc Daily Journal.

F.



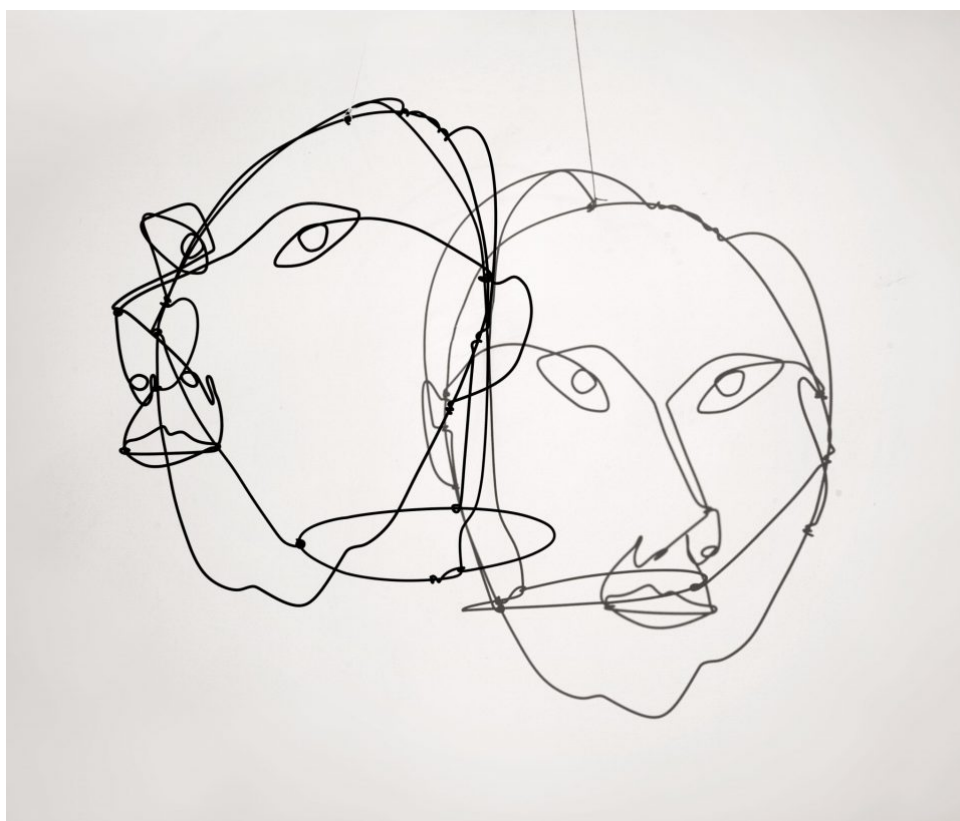
Quake City.
Lebbeus Woods.
Image Courtesy of
SFMOMA

G.



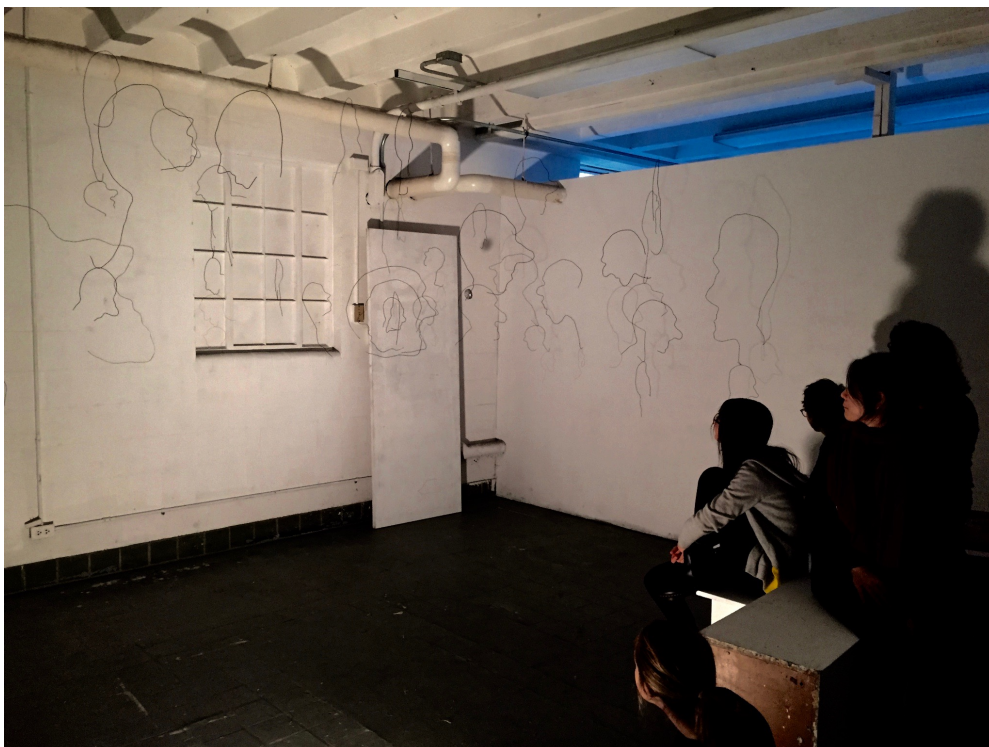
Chrysler. 2016
24"x18"
Ink on paper.

H.



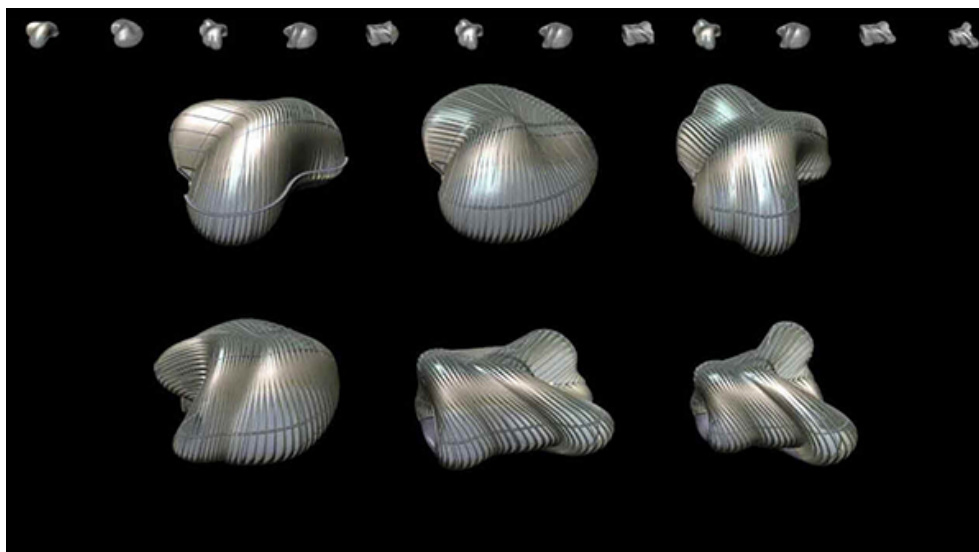
*Portrait of Giovanni
Carandente.* 1976.
Alexander Calder.
Image courtesy of
Anouk Yve.

I.



Fifty Faces. 2016.
Wire installation.

J.



Embryological House.
Gregg Lynn.
Image Courtesy of
Arcduecittà
Magazine.

K.



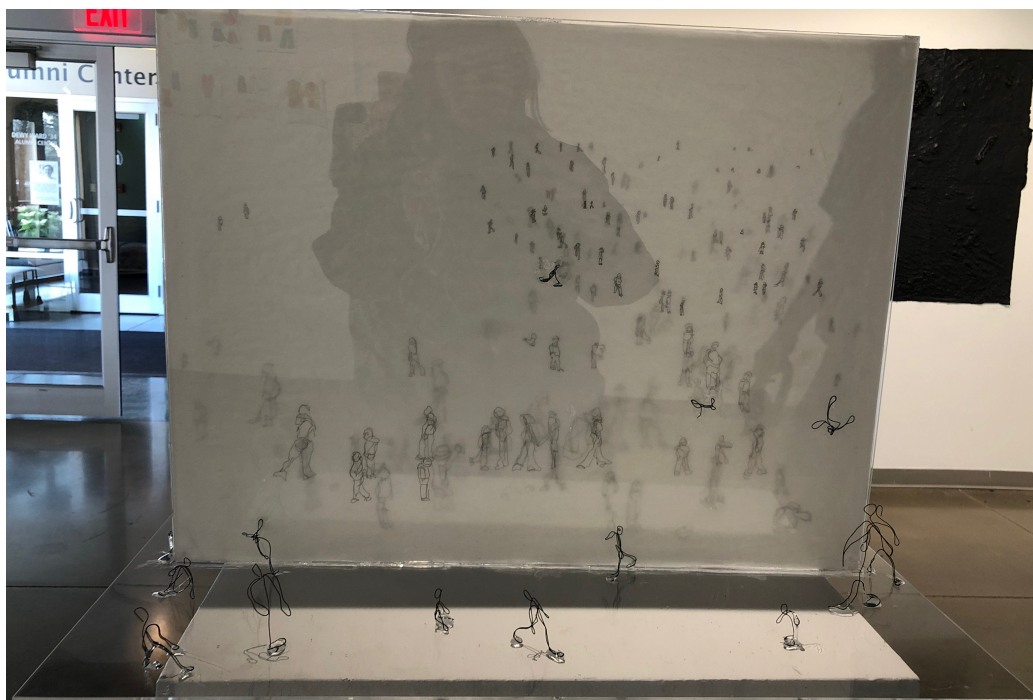
Slice of Siena.
2017. Installation.

L.



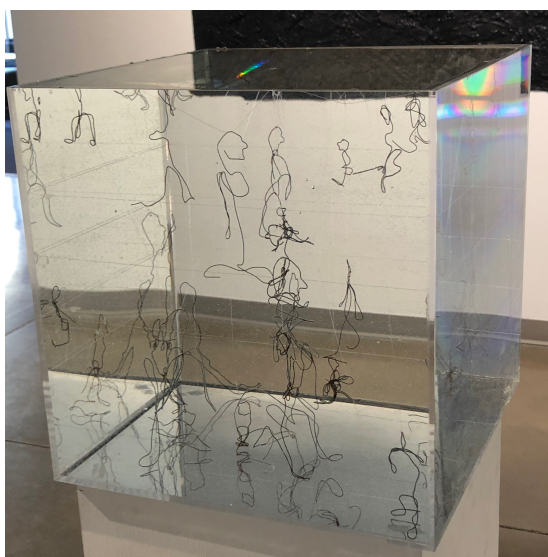
Ghosts. 2017.
17"x24"
Ink on
vellum.

M.

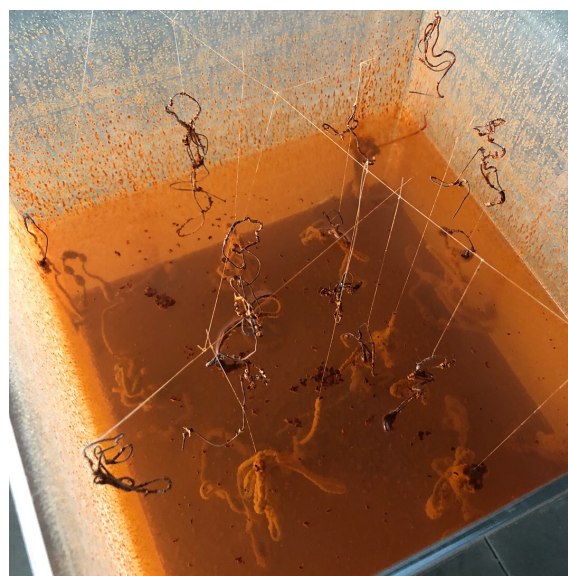


Blueprint.
2017.
Ink on vellum,
wire, glue.
17"x24"x24"

N.



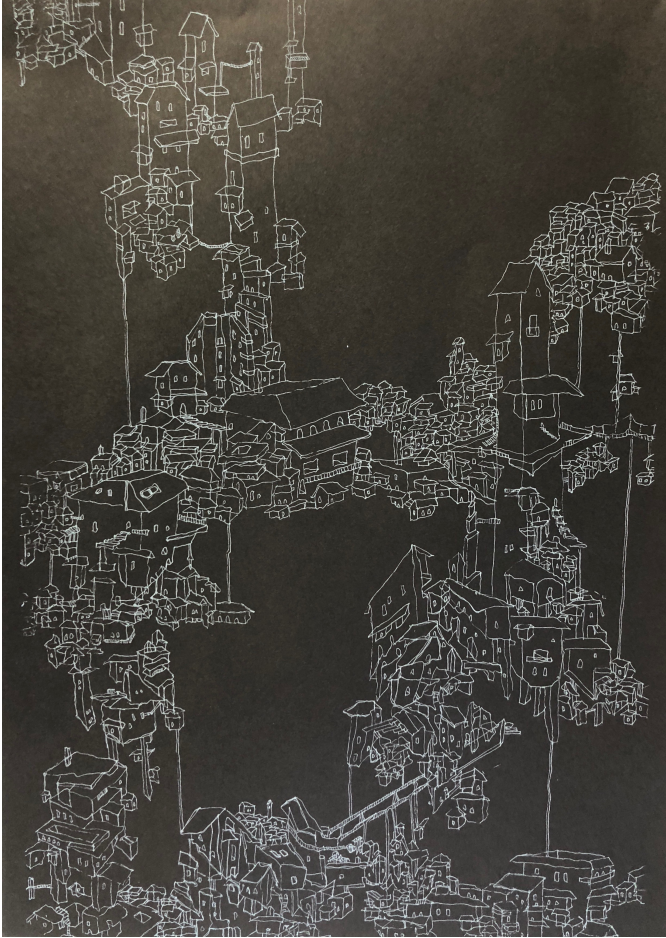
Model. December 2017. 12"x12"x12" Plexiglass, wire



Model. February 2018.

Stories in the Walls

O.



Model Series. 2018. 12" x 24".
Screen print

P.





Model Series. 2018.
Wire installation.
Variable dimensions.

Q.



Structure Series: big.
8'x8'x9'
2018.

R.



Structure Series small.
3D print. 6"x6"x8" 2018.